



RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT

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Testimony Re: House Bill 5532, An Act Relating To Education -- The Education Equity And Property Tax Relief Act

House Finance Committee

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony. We would like to thank Representative Furtado for sponsoring this important bill and Representatives Kazarian, Messier, Cruz, Read, Boylan, Alzate, Stewart, Donovan, and Morales for co-sponsoring. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its support for elements of House Bill 5532, which would require additional state education categorical funding for the mental and behavioral health of students equal to two percent (2%) of the district's total expenditures and would further require that those funds be used to hire and retain school social workers, counselors, psychologists, paraprofessionals, behavioral specialists, and registered behavior technicians.

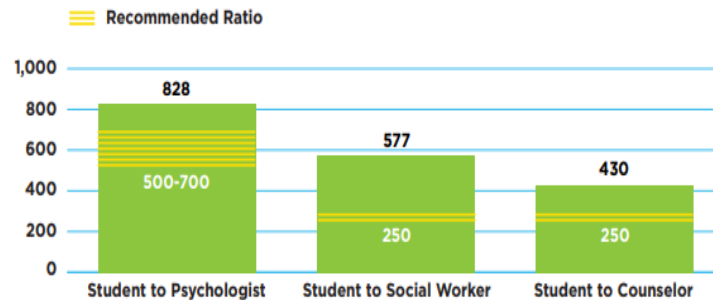
Over the years, Rhode Island has taken several steps to ensure that all children have access to the high-quality education they need to succeed in school, career, and life. In 2010, the General Assembly enacted the state's first education funding formula which was based on five key principles – equity, adequacy, predictability, accountability, and efficiency. We thank the General Assembly leadership and the Finance Committee for all your hard work to establish the funding formula through legislation, to ensure that it is fully funded, and to seek improvements to the formula to better meet the needs of Rhode Island students.

The interactions and relationships that youth have in school can influence their mental well-being. A healthy school climate helps promote and protect youth mental well-being. In the U.S., students are 21 times more likely to visit school-based health centers for mental health than community mental health centers. This is especially true in school districts in areas with a high concentration of poverty. Schools can assess and provide intervention and treatment for students with additional mental health needs. School psychologists, school social workers, school counselors, and school nurses all have a role to play in supporting students' mental health. Providing mental health resources in schools can remove barriers to access for students (e.g., transportation, scheduling conflicts, and stigma), and schools can also refer youth to more intensive resources in the community when needed.

We know that ensuring access to these individuals at the school level has a tremendous impact on student mental health and well-being. The National Association of School Psychologists recommends a ratio of 500 to 700 students per school psychologist. The School Social Work Association of America recommends a ratio of 250 students per social worker. The American School Counselor Association recommends a ratio of 250 students per school

counselor. However, Rhode Island has much higher school mental health professional-to-student ratios than recommended in all categories.

STUDENT-TO-MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONAL RATIO IN SCHOOLS, RHODE ISLAND, 2017-2018



Untreated mental health conditions can impair daily functioning, affect academic achievement, increase involvement with the youth justice and child welfare systems, result in high treatment costs, diminish family incomes, and increase the risk of suicide. Feelings of safety and connection with the school are the most important school climate factors for promoting and protecting students' mental and emotional well-being. Social workers and other school-based mental health professionals are essential in creating and sustaining positive school climates. They can improve health outcomes, school safety, attendance rates, graduation rates, academic achievement, and career preparation, and lower suspension rates and other disciplinary incidents.

We support this bill's expressed intent to increase the number and availability of school mental health professionals as well as its aim to maintain restorative discipline practices through additional state funding. **However, we are concerned about the current language which states school districts, must be *below* industry-recommended ratios to be eligible to receive additional funding.** We believe there is ambiguity in the current language and recommend clarifying the language to state, "Districts that do not meet industry recommended ratios will be eligible to receive support" or "Districts with higher mental health professional-to-student ratios than the recommended industry standards will be eligible to receive support." We believe this small change in language will drive the intent of this bill which is to support districts who do not meet industry standards to be eligible for additional funding to hire more mental health professionals in schools to meet industry standards.

Ensuring youth have the mental health support they need in school to be successful is needed now more than ever.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony.